

Robbin, A. (2000). Administrative policy as symbol system: Political conflict and the social construction of identity. *Administration and Society*, 32(4), 398-431.

Administration & Society

<http://aas.sagepub.com>

Administrative Policy as Symbol System: Political Conflict and the Social Construction of Identity

Alice Robbin

Administration & Society 2000; 32; 398

DOI: 10.1177/00953990022019489

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://aas.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/32/4/398>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Administration & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://aas.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://aas.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations (this article cites 18 articles hosted on the
SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):
<http://aas.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/32/4/398>

Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity, formerly known as Statistical Policy Directive 15, is a classification system that governs the U.S. government's collection and presentation of data on race and ethnicity. The directive underwent a public evaluation between 1993 and 1997 to determine whether the racial and ethnic group categories should be revised. This article links theories of the role of the state in the social order and the social construction of identity to explain how conflictual political processes modify administrative policy. Two narratives on the debates over the reclassification of "Native Hawaiians" and the addition of a "multiracial" category illustrate recent political conflicts over group identities established by state agencies. The author argues that the main explanation for administrative policy changes was the responsiveness of state agencies to political demands of significantly mobilized groups with claims to state resources.

ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY AS SYMBOL SYSTEM

Political Conflict and the Social Construction of Identity

ALICE ROBBIN
Indiana University at Bloomington

Naming is the means by which human beings have always given an identity to things, to themselves, to the world and everything in it. Through names, people have reached out to seize, order, and command the cosmos.

—Montgomery (1996, pp. 196-197)

Classification systems designed by the state are a lens through which societal change is legitimated and standardized by bureaucratic and technical means and then rationalized as a technology for implementing public policy. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) classi-

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I am indebted to Robert R. Alford for his continuing support of my research project and his careful attention to my theoretical argument, and I thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their excellent suggestions that improved this article. Of course, I alone am responsible for the analysis.*



ADMINISTRATION & SOCIETY, Vol. 32 No. 4, September 2000 398-431
© 2000 Sage Publications, Inc.

fication system for "racial" and "ethnic group" data is a culturally significant symbol system. It reproduces historical and current ideological thought, institutional power, and the contested terrain of political and social relations. Categories of "race" and "ethnicity" have multiple connotations that evoke dilemmas and contradictions about self, group membership, community, and governance.¹

The United States has classified "racial" and "ethnic" group data since its first census in 1790 and since the turn of the 20th century in other federal administrative records and surveys (Duncan & Shelton, 1978; Edmonston & Schultze, 1994). Politics and social and economic conditions have influenced the appearance and disappearance of "racial" and "ethnic" group categories (M. J. Anderson, 1988; Davis, 1991; Espiritu, 1992; Estrada, 1992).

Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity—better known as Statistical Policy Directive 15, Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting—created, in 1977, a classification system of four "race" categories ("American Indian or Alaskan Native," "Asian or Pacific Islander," "Black/Negro," and "White") and one "ethnic" origin category ("Hispanic").² The standards established by Directive 15 governed the federal government's practices of civil rights compliance, general administrative record keeping, and statistical data collection and reporting for 20 years, until November 1997.

Between 1993 and 1997, the directive was the subject of a government-wide public review managed by the OMB. The rationale for the public review included the changing demographic composition of the nation through immigration and interracial marriage and growing measurement problems associated with the categories. The assessment culminated in an official revision of the standard at the end of October 1997, which divided the "Asian or Pacific Islander" category into "Asian" and "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander" categories and also permitted respondents to identify more than one "race."

The 4-year public review was a contentious and still unfinished political and bureaucratic attempt to modify administrative policy. Why did public controversy occur over a classification system that was presumably motivated by administrative needs for consistent, reliable, comparable, and accurate data to implement legislative initiatives of the 1960s? How can we explain the content and outcome of the subsequent debate? Why and how are such categories an important aspect of social and political identity?

This article explains the public controversy over the classification system for “racial” and “ethnic” data and illustrates the theoretical issues with two case studies.³ First, I explain the role of the state in public policy on “racial” and “ethnic” statistics and the meaning of the discourse about the classification system for participants in the public review process. Second, I explore the historical and political context of the public assessment of Statistical Policy Directive 15. The last section illustrates the powerful symbolic nature of administrative policy with two case studies of political conflict over the reclassification of “Native Hawaiians” into the “American Indian and Alaska Native” category and the addition of a “multiracial” category. These narratives are constructed from congressional and OMB hearings, public comments that followed three *Federal Register* notices, newspaper articles, and transcripts of radio and television broadcasts. Concluding remarks outline an integrated theory of political conflict in the administrative sphere, which links explanations of agenda setting, the trajectory of racial politics, and the mobilization of interest groups.

OFFICIAL CLASSIFICATION AS SYMBOL SYSTEM

Political institutions organize and govern social life, embedding historical experiences in their rules and practices (Alford & Friedland, 1985; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Friedland & Alford, 1991). But, the reverse is also true. Political actions that challenge state policies shape symbol systems and mold interpretations and preferences (Edelman, 1964). The interplay of state action and popular action gives coherence and legitimacy to political and social identity (Alford, 1998; Edelman, 1971; March & Olsen, 1989; Omi & Winant, 1994).

Language as a symbol system “shapes the meaning of what the general public and government officials see” and “evokes most of the political ‘realities’ that people experience,” wrote Edelman (1977, p. 3). Language is, however, open to “varying situations and to the range of interests of speakers and audiences” (Edelman, 1988, p. 116). Linguistic classifications are part of the “formation of hypotheses as to the nature of things” (Cohen & Nagel, 1934, p. 223) and presuppose a whole set of theoretical assumptions (Potter, 1996).

Official classification systems help explain the way the world is and how people see that world and shape interpretations of history, preferences, and commitments to action (cf. March & Olsen, 1989, pp. 40-52). The numbers produced by official classification systems furnish a stable

language normally accepted as the basis of subsequent debates about public policy. Bureaucratic routinization reinforces a sense that the measures are real, the properties of categories invariant, and their meaning unproblematic (Lee, 1993; Nagel, 1986, 1994; Petersen, 1969).

Official measures are usually not perceived to be part of active political discourse—they are above (or “below”) any debate that takes place (Desrosières, 1993, pp. 7-8). But, sometimes challenges occur to what is often submerged in the controversies over public policy. Do the statistics lie? How many people are “Asian,” “Hispanic,” or “African American”? What is the real number of unemployed “African Americans”? Does intelligence differ by “race”? How many undocumented aliens are “Irish”? What is the real birthrate among “Hispanics”? Do mortality and morbidity differ by “race” and “ethnic” group?

The measures that these systems organize attain a seemingly independent status that is perceived as valid and important by all potential stakeholders: bureaucrats, interest groups, and citizens alike. Political conflict over the categories brings their premises, assumptions, and problematic status into public view. How members of a group and others perceive the categories and associate their meanings with events in political and social life depends on the “observers’ situations and the language that reflects and interprets those situations” (Edelman, 1977, p. 10). Classification systems provoke political controversy when the symbolic universe of language opens up to permit new conceptions of identity.

THE MEANING OF THE CLASSIFICATION OF “RACIAL” AND “ETHNIC” GROUP DATA

Both “racial” and “ethnic” identity are influenced by culture and context and thus are fluid, flexible, and vary over the life course (Nagel, 1994; Waters, 1990).⁴ Most people do not distinguish between the terms “race,” “ethnicity,” “ancestry,” and “national origin” according to research conducted by McKay and de la Puente (1995) and other research conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1996, 1997b) and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (1996). Most persons interpret these terms as a single concept, find the terms redundant, and treat them as semantically identical.

“Race” as a concept, Omi and Winant (1994) conclude, is “subject to political contestation because it structures both the state and civil society and shapes both [social] identities and institutions in significant ways” (p. vii). Racial identity “organizes social inequalities of various sorts, shapes the very geography of American life, and frames political initiatives

and state action" (p. vii). Official classification of "race" and "ethnicity" provides the bureaucratic justification for rules that establish the legitimacy of political action in the civil state (e.g., citizenship), embed individuals in a network of social relations (e.g., majority status–minority status, property owner–slave), allocate important social resources, and create both commitments to and deviations from social norms (e.g., miscegenation, slavery, multiculturalism, interracial marriage) (Omi & Winant, 1994, pp. 83-84).

Because the state's influence permeates social life, claims either privileged or ignored by the state permeate other social institutions. The administrative rules of the game, as well as the language of "racial" and "ethnic" identity, are appropriated by other institutions, further reinforcing "who counts as a political actor, what is a political interest, and how the broad state/society relationship is to be organized" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 83).

THE RESPONSE OF THE STATE TO THE PROBLEMATICS OF "RACIAL" AND "ETHNIC" IDENTITY

Classification of "racial" and "ethnic" data as a policy issue remained until 1993 largely isolated in an administrative arena monopolized by those groups associated with the statistical establishment. March and Olsen (1989) offer one explanation for policy inaction: "There is a tendency for large, powerful actors to be able to specify their environments, thus forcing other actors to adapt to them. Dominant groups create environments to which others must respond" (p. 47). This inaction creates a certain stability (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). What is problematic about "racial" and "ethnic" group categorization was recognized during the 1980s, but the state took little or no action until 1993.

Institutions and groups that do not attend to their environment may find themselves unable to cope with challenges when political confrontation erupts (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Edelman, 1988; March & Olsen, 1989, p. 47; Omi & Winant, 1994). The location where disputes get resolved changes from the internal administrative arena to the larger political arena. What was once a segregated, isolated policy domain becomes linked to other policy arenas in which there are competing views. I will address later the conditions for such episodic disruptions of previously settled state policies (cf. Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

The state eventually responds to group conflict and political demands by "orchestrating to assure its audience that the choice has been made

intelligently, the choice is sensitive to the concerns of relevant people, and the political system is controlled by its leadership" (March & Olsen, 1989, p. 50). Public announcements are made of the need to gather information. The origins of the problem are identified as state agencies consult with all parties, consider alternatives, and describe—often in excruciating detail—the processes and reasoning for their decisions (the role played by the *Federal Register* notice, for example). The "solutions" provided by new public policies are likely primarily to reinforce long-standing and well-recognized social cleavages (such as race relations and income disparities) "in which relative power is well established and widely recognized" (Edelman, 1988, p. 20). Some policies may change to pacify momentarily mobilized groups.

Changes are likely to be just enough to reduce conflict and "reproduce the prevailing order" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 85). Where equilibrium is temporarily restored, the state has, suggest March and Olsen (1989), "organized a potentially disorderly political process, provided continuity, and created an interpretive order within which political behavior can be understood" (p. 52). (I will show later how OMB's actions were consistent with this prediction.) OMB called a temporary halt to the public debate, justifying its decision by the need to meet the deadline for field testing the 2000 census.

THE POLITICAL BASES OF STATISTICAL POLICY DIRECTIVE 15

The census has never been a neutral tool for counting the population for apportionment purposes (M. J. Anderson, 1988; Feeney, 1994; Mitroff, Mason, & Barabba, 1983). The enumeration of "race" has always reflected the "enormous importance of the black/white color line in our society and the distinctive legacy of slavery" (Waters, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, p. 440). The one-drop-of-blood (hypodescent) rule has governed—both by law and in practice—the classification of "race" for all "non-White" persons, naming conventions, and observer perception of the proportion of African blood (Davis, 1991; Dominguez, 1986; Frankenberg, 1993; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989). This rule has privileged one class ("White") over all others, whether the assigned label was "Colored," "not White," "other," "Mulatto," or "Mestizo" (Robbin, in press).

ORIGINS OF STATISTICAL POLICY DIRECTIVE 15

OMB Statistical Policy Directive 15 originated in a recommendation by the April 1973 Federal Interagency Committee on Education (FICE) Subcommittee on Minority Education (FICE, 1975). The FICE Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions was officially created in June 1974 as a coordinating body, and its recommendations were submitted in April 1975. After a year of initial testing and implementation, OMB issued Revised Exhibit F to OMB Circular No. A-46, known informally as Statistical Policy Directive 15. Its recommendations became effective in 1977 for all new and revised record-keeping systems and in 1980 for all existing record-keeping and reporting systems (Standards for the Classification, 1994, p. 29832).

The directive institutionalized a classification system for official statistics on "race" and "ethnic" origin. It defined four "racial" categories ("Black," "Asian or Pacific Islander," "American Indian," and "White") and established rules for membership in a category, aiming to control information collection, presentation, and comparability throughout government. It tried to create flexibility through an administrative process whereby agencies could request additional categories. The directive mandated minimum data collection for "race" and "ethnic" origin to monitor civil rights compliance, meet those program administrative and grant reporting requirements that included "racial" or "ethnic" data, and ensure adequate reporting of "federal sponsored statistical data where race and/or ethnicity is required" (with exceptions, however). The "ethnic" category of "Hispanic origin, Not of Hispanic origin" was included to comply with Public Law 94-311 of June 16, 1976 (90 Stat. 688), which required the collection, analysis, and publication of statistics for Americans of "Spanish" origin (*Economic and Social Statistics*, 1975; Wallman, 1978). Self-identification of only one "racial" category was permitted from a set of legitimate categories. People who would now be viewed as having a "biracial" or "multiracial" heritage were required to choose only one "race." The directive recommended but did not require that self-identification be the preferred manner of data collection.

The development of Directive 15 was not arrived at by consensus. There was, according to the report, "considerable discussion, disagreement, give-and-take, and compromise on the part of the Ad Hoc Committee members . . . in this very difficult area," and the report included a minority dissent for every category (FICE, 1975, p. 2). That classification presented "major problems" (the language used in the report) confirms that the meetings of the Ad Hoc Committee were replete with substantial

differences of opinion.⁵ In the time between the Ad Hoc Committee Report's recommendation that "East Asians" be included in the "White" category and the issuance of the standard by OMB, "East Asians" had successfully lobbied to be classified as members of the "Asian or Pacific Islander" category (Lott, cited in *Review of Federal Measurements*, 1993, p. 44).

CONSEQUENCES OF IMPLEMENTING STATISTICAL POLICY DIRECTIVE 15

Once established as administrative routine, however, the standard guided the routine practices of government agencies, Congress, the private sector, and minority population interest groups. It shaped the identity of ordinary citizens. The requirement that executive agencies collect "racial" and "ethnic" group information became institutionalized in nearly every one of the 50 titles of the United States Code and associated administrative regulations. State and local governments, intergovernmental organizations, and firms in the private sector became subject to the standard for classification when "racial" and "ethnic" data were collected.

Although the directive was explicitly not to be used for program participation eligibility, it became an essential administrative tool for monitoring civil rights compliance, administering agency programs, and classifying and counting groups. Agencies became dependent on procedures specified by the directive to comply with statutory and administrative program needs that were based on population classified into "racial" and "ethnic" categories (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997a).

According to Juanita Lott, a policy analyst who testified at the 1993 congressional hearings, the significance of the 1977 directive went far beyond the design and implementation of affirmative action laws and social policy (*Review of Federal Measurements*, 1993). The "effect of the standard was to redefine the U.S. population beyond a White and non-White classification" (pp. 44-46). The classification system was sufficiently robust to document that the United States was no longer a society of "White" majority and "Black" minority. The classification system also provided policy makers with some degree of historical continuity in data, which could be used for program development and implementation.

The original standard stated and the *Federal Register* notices reiterated that the classification system was not presumed to have scientific status. Nevertheless, because the authority of the state had created the standard, the bureaucratic categorization of "race" assumed an aura of scientific

authority and objectivity. The population characteristics of "race" and "ethnicity" enumerated by the census and other administrative record-keeping systems became the benchmarks on which public and private sample surveys were based.

The categories that identified particular groups created a widespread perception that the standard was responsible for conferring legal status as a protected class for civil rights compliance. Furthermore, the creation of "racial" and "ethnic" origin categories served as a powerful "referent to reinforce group consciousness and social recognition" (Edmonston, Goldstein, & Lott, 1996, pp. 8-10) and to mobilize an array of stakeholders that both supported and opposed the directive. Federal agencies (especially the U.S. Bureau of the Census) have never been immune to political pressure. Responding to minority population concerns about representation and access to program resources, the number of subgroups within the original categories expanded from year to year in administrative record keeping systems (Robbin, *in press*).

The standard was also perceived as contributing to racial divisions in society. "Racial" categorization unintentionally reinforced negative "racial" stereotypes and intensified perceptions by opponents of social welfare programs, affirmative action, and immigration policies that the standard was responsible for the inequitable treatment that benefited protected groups at the expense of the "White" majority.⁶ Although I focus in this article on the 1993 through 1997 political and administrative conflicts over its revision, Directive 15 never succeeded in establishing its authority as a neutral and objective set of standards.

ORIGINS OF THE 1993 THROUGH 1997 REVIEW OF STATISTICAL POLICY DIRECTIVE 15

Although the programmatic mission justified the bureaucratic requirement for standardization and comparability of "racial" and "ethnic" data collection and reporting, in fact, the statistics were not uniformly collected or reported across or within federal agencies. This was particularly true for those agencies that depended on data collection by organizations or administrative units outside the federal government (cf. Hahn, 1992; Hahn, Mulinare, & Teutsch, 1992). Problems of category membership, definitions, and naming conventions, which had first been identified by the FICE Ad Hoc Committee 20 years earlier as major problems, resurfaced in the 1993 through 1997 revision process.

Research conducted by statisticians and survey methodologists inside and outside the federal government revealed imprecise definitions, category names that did not correspond to how people defined themselves, and categories that were neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. These problems yielded (a) inconsistencies in responses and (b) nonresponse; they contributed to what members of various federal agencies termed a "growing measurement error" with "racial" and "ethnic" statistics (Robbin, 1999). However, these technical problems would not have sufficed alone to force a revision. The fluidity of "racial" and "ethnic" identity, movement in and out of social groups, and the historical complexity of American ancestries also all contributed to measurement error.

Statistical Policy Directive 15 came under increasing public scrutiny in the early 1990s as attention focused on the 2000 decennial census following what was more than a decade of controversy over the 1980 and 1990 censuses related to "race" and "ethnicity" items.⁷ Two issues were central: the data quality of the decennial census and participation of minority population interest groups in planning the decennial census.

Although the classification system "redefined race and ethnicity in ways to be selectively inclusive and flexible to meet various federal policy and programmatic needs," at the same time, "differential treatment continued to be given to Whites who were designated the majority group and Blacks who were designated the principal minority group" (Lott, cited in *Review of Federal Measurements*, 1993, p. 44). Couples in interracial marriages represented, according to the 1970 decennial census, only about 300,000 of more than 44 million married couples (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Changes in immigration policies between the 1960s and 1980s, however, significantly altered the "racial" and "ethnic" composition of the nation.

POLITICS OF THE REVISION OF STATISTICAL POLICY DIRECTIVE 15, 1993 THROUGH 1997

The revisions of Statistical Policy Directive 15 stemmed mainly from political conflicts over political representation, entitlement programs, and affirmative action, not from increasing measurement error. Vociferous opposition to or support for modifying the standard by political actors who stood to lose or benefit materially or symbolically placed the agencies in a political and administrative quandary. Between 1993 and 1997, the classification system for "race" and "ethnic" group categories became the subject of national media coverage, interest group lobbying, and

congressional attention. Seven congressional hearings took place in 1993 and 1997, four OMB hearings were held in July 1994, and extensive public comment followed *Federal Register* notices issued by OMB in 1994, 1995, and 1997.⁸

The June 1994 *Federal Register* notice issued by OMB structured the public response that was to follow. It (a) invited comments that reflected satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the existing directive and suggestions and criticisms on the current categories, (b) identified criticisms of the current standard, and (c) linked the review to census 2000. The public testimony of the congressional and OMB hearings, as well as letters received following the *Federal Register* notices, shows the goal of clarifying administrative purposes was mostly ignored by the public, as were the goals of comparability and exchange across agencies. Neither technical nor administrative rationality triggered the revisions.

OMB became the focus of organized lobbying by individual citizens and "ethnic" group associations that mobilized over a policy domain that had—prior to the 1980 and 1990 censuses—been monopolized by professional statisticians, social scientists, and business interest groups. A wide array of members of fraternal, voluntary, church, civic, "ethnic," and advocacy groups entered the administrative arena, some advocating a "multiracial" category or "White ethnic" categories, others mobilized by experienced minority population interest groups.

Joining the debate were members of Congress and federal agencies that assumed an advocacy role on behalf of their constituents. Policy analysts, sociologists, health researchers, and demographers argued that the standard provided the basis for collecting data to examine historical trends and monitor the nation's health and welfare. Anthropologists, represented by the American Anthropological Association (1997), took the position that the epistemological basis for the classification system was flawed and that "racial" identity as a category ought to be eliminated, to be replaced by a single term: either "ethnicity" or "ancestry."

The public review was notable for its at times rancorous, "racially" defined intergroup competition (Robbin, 2000). Two conflicts were especially significant. First, "multiracial" and "multiethnic" organizations lobbied for the addition of a "multiracial" category and were opposed by well-known minority population interest groups created by the existing categories, including "American Indians," "African Americans," "Hispanics," and "Asian or Pacific Islanders." The second conflict occurred between "Native Hawaiians" and "American Indians" over the reclassification of "Native Hawaiians" in the historic category of "American Indian

and Alaska Native," a position that was intensely opposed by "American Indian" tribal leaders.

The June 1994 *Federal Register* notice also officially created an Interagency Committee for the Review of the Racial and Ethnic Standards, which worked behind closed doors, creating an impression of strategic unity to outsiders (Standards for the Classification, 1994).⁹ OMB and the agencies were under considerable pressure to reach a decision by mid-1997 because the racial and ethnic group categories had to be included in the dress rehearsal for the 2000 census, which would be fielded in April 1998.

The recommendations made by the OMB Interagency Committee, which appeared in the July 1997 *Federal Register* notice, rejected the addition of a "multiracial" category (Recommendations, 1997). The committee also rejected the reclassification of "Native Hawaiians" in the "American Indian and Alaska Native" category and maintained them in the "Asian or Pacific Islander" category. In contrast to public comments following the two earlier *Federal Register* notices, there were relatively few letters received by OMB from the "multiracial" lobby. Two major "multiethnic" groups, the Association of MultiEthnic Americans and Hapa, broke ranks with the other major lobby for a "multiracial" category, Project RACE, to join with minority population interest groups in support of the Interagency Committee recommendation to identify multiple checkoffs for "racial" identity. Although nearly all the minority population interest groups and their advocates in governmental agencies had vigorously opposed any changes to the standard, and in particular a "multiracial" category, by the time the August 1997 congressional hearing was held, all agencies and these interest groups at least publicly accepted the multiple checkoff for "race."

Between July and October 1997, OMB was, however, subject to an extensive lobbying campaign that extended from the mainland to Hawaii. When the October 1997 *Federal Register* notice, which contained the final decision on the revision, was issued, OMB opted to separate the "Asian or Pacific Islander" population groups into two categories and rename the latter portion of the original category "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander" (Revisions to the Standards, 1997). It was, for the participants, another indication that the standard was a political decision that took federal agencies out of the loop, as one government statistician explained it to me in August 1998.

The public review debate of Directive 15 was never isolated from its larger political context. The decennial census had come under attack by

members of Congress over the use of sampling to improve the enumeration. Serious discussions had occurred about eliminating the ancestry item in the one-in-seven sample. Challenges to affirmative action were perceived as threatening the substantial gains made by "African Americans" and "Hispanics," in particular. Welfare policy was being restructured. Middle East terrorism entered the country. This political environment most likely converted opposition by minority population groups to support for changes in the standard because they feared a spillover effect from their continued opposition to changes in the directive. The context of the public review thus amplified and constrained the political discourse about the role of the classification system in identity formation.

POLITICAL CONFLICT IN INTERPRETIVE MODES OF INQUIRY

CATEGORIES AS METAPHORS FOR HISTORICAL STRUGGLE¹⁰

The public review of Statistical Policy Directive 15 was notable for the political mobilization of "Hawaiian" groups that lobbied intensively to establish their status as indigenous peoples by reclassifying "Native Hawaiians" into the "American Indian and Alaska Native" category.¹¹ A national campaign was mounted by "American Indian" tribal leaders to oppose the reclassification.

The essence of the "Native Hawaiian" argument was that a particular category allowed similarly oppressed "racial/ethnic" groups to be treated differently. Public policy produced differential treatment in terms of access to resources by privileging named groups with specific institutional claims on the state. "Native Hawaiians" sought to justify reclassification based on the claim that "Native Hawaiians" and "American Indians" shared a similar history of struggle and economic disadvantage and thus a relationship with the state that should be reflected in public policy.

In every testimony before Congress or OMB and in written letters submitted as public comment, "Native Hawaiian" and "American Indian" representatives recounted their story of a sovereign nation: an indigenous people who were not immigrants, who possessed a culture. They stressed the importance of the land to their community and bemoaned the elimination of a people by the U.S. government. Their history was one of a people destroyed and lands stolen, deprivation of the rights to self-determination, and broken promises. They emphasized the special relationship that the

“Native Hawaiian” or “American Indian” maintained with the state. This special relationship justified present-day commitments and responsibilities of the state. “Many of the wrongs done to the American Indians also were done to the native Hawaiians, and they must be corrected now. It is the proper and right thing to do,” said the president of the Kokua Loa Research Institute, who testified for the Native Hawaiian Chamber of Commerce at the OMB hearing held in Honolulu (*Public Hearing on Standards*, 1994, p. 65).

Both “Native Hawaiian” and “American Indian” groups were in agreement that the categorization of identity acknowledged a political—not a “racial”—relationship. “We urge you,” wrote Myron B. Thompson, chairman of the Board of Trustees of Kamehameha Schools Bernice Pauahi Bishop Estate, to OMB,

to make special note that this classification is primarily political rather than racial in nature, because Native Hawaiians are sovereign people who either had or presently have a government-to-government relationship with the United States. Referring to a person in racial terms when that person is in his own homeland mischaracterizes the person’s status in relation to the land as somehow that of an immigrant, when in actuality it is the rest of the world that has settled in his country. (FR1-208, p. 3)

Thompson’s remarks were echoed—but in opposition—by Larry Rodgers, statistician and demographer for the Navajo Nation, who wrote that “the American Indians, the original inhabitants of this country, as well as the continent, have indisputable, revered relationships with the United States through treaty compacts and over 218 years of conflict and resolve” (FR1-159, p. 1).

Over and over, in letters to OMB and at OMB and congressional hearings, “American Indian” spokespersons contended that the tribes were sovereign nations that had a political relationship with the federal government and that “Native Hawaiians” did not have this same legitimate relationship with the federal government. In her testimony before Congress, the executive director of the National Congress of American Indians emphasized that “American Indians” differed from “Native Hawaiians” because their relationship to the U.S. government was based on the “trust responsibility owed by the Federal Government to Indian tribes” and because the “American Indians” had “ceded vast lands and resources to the United States which were accompanied by certain promises to Indian tribes, such as to provide into perpetuity various goods and services . . . and the right to self-government among others” (Ma, cited in *Federal*

Measures, 1997, p. 420). The "American Indian" tribal leaders concluded that their relationship with the United States was very different from the "Native Hawaiians' " relationship.

Official "racial" and "ethnic" identity was intimately related to access to resources for the most disadvantaged of "Americans," but it was precisely these goods and services noted by the executive director of the National Congress of American Indians that had not been extended to the "Native Hawaiian." The claim of the legitimacy of reclassification was thus grounded in a conception of "Pacific Americans" who, "for too long, have been stranded on the margins, when the waves of opportunity in education, business, leadership, health, professional development, and civil rights swept over our country" (FR1-095, pp. 4-5). In opposition, "American Indians" argued, "The equitable, rightful, and appropriate levels of services to the real American Indian should be of prominent concern when dealing with this most economically-disadvantaged population in the United States" (FR1-104, p. 2).

For both "Native Hawaiians" and "American Indians," the directive was a metaphor for historical struggles as minority peoples who had been disenfranchised and nearly extirpated. The claims made for membership in a category established each group's identity in its unique political relationship with the state. Once established in administrative procedures, that fundamentally political relationship provided protection, political and civil rights, and material benefits; it conferred a public identity that could be counted and quantified. According to groups calling themselves "Native Hawaiians," the standard had to be modified to allow them access to these privileges. According to "American Indians," revision of the standard had to be opposed because reclassification was based on the faulty premise of a similarity between the two groups.

CATEGORY AS METAPHOR FOR ACHIEVING THE COMMON GOOD

The central conflict during the 4-year review of Statistical Policy Directive 15 concerned the addition of a "multiracial" category. This issue had first surfaced on the policy agenda in 1988, when OMB issued a draft circular that called for public review of the standard and offered a proposal for some revisions, including a requirement for "racial" and "ethnic" self-identification and the addition of an "other" category. Members of the Senate, federal agencies, and minority population groups so vigorously opposed OMB's proposals that they were subsequently withdrawn. During the congressional hearings, however, the Association of MultiEthnic

Americans testified in favor of a "multiracial" category. In 1991, Project RACE was formally established to lobby for the addition of a "multiracial" category.

During the 1990s, the Association of MultiEthnic Americans and Project RACE, along with other "multiethnic" and "multiracial" organizations, launched a national campaign on behalf of a "multiracial" category.¹² These "multiracial" and "multiethnic" groups were new entrants to the political and administrative arenas; they comprised apolitical citizens who had for the most part confined their activities to voluntary social organizations for "interracial," "biracial," "multiracial," or "multiethnic" families. They were opposed by the major statistical and civil rights agencies in the federal government, members of the Congressional Black Caucus, social scientists, policy analysts, and those minority population interest groups established by previous census categories.¹³ Nevertheless, these "multiracial" and "multiethnic" advocacy organizations were successful. They created a symbolic place at the table for "multiracial" groups and framed the research agenda of the federal agencies.¹⁴

Like the "Native Hawaiians" and "American Indians," the arguments put forth by the two opposing sides for the addition of a "multiracial" category evoked the historical struggle of the "other," the "non-White," and the dispossessed in American history and the call for the state to assure justice and political equality.

Framed in the context of a proposed new "multiracial" category, the debate evoked different conceptions of the responsibilities of the state in assuring the well-being of individuals, groups, and the civic community. One aspect of the debate concerned whether the state or the individual served as the authoritative source of identity. Should the state intervene in what might be (or should be) construed as private and autonomous choices? Should the individual, the social group, or the community be privileged in order to reach a more just society? The conceptions of opponents and supporters of what constituted the public good and what they believed should be the outcome of the assessment process affected how they assessed the importance of the directive and thus their very different ways of framing the "multiracial" issue. I address these diverse approaches to individuality, group identity, and community.

The Census Bureau representative who said to the mother of biracial children who objected to why her children should be classified as their mother's race only: "Because in cases like these, we always know who the mother is and not the father."

The child in Georgia whose teacher said: "You better go home and figure out what you are. You can't be both." (Graham, cited in *Review of Federal Measurements*, 1993, pp. 106-107.)

Advocates for a "multiracial" category relied principally on the liberal value of individuality—individual autonomy and the fostering of human potential and self-esteem. They tried to strengthen their claims with the converse language of commonality and community. The language of civil rights and affirmative action, which privileges the social group, was also used. Finally, they employed the warrant of scientific authority to support their argument.

First, they appealed to individuality. Advocates of a "multiracial" category did not believe that people should be "forced to adapt certain models of life" that precluded the freedom to realize their potential (Gauss, 1983, p. 33). The privileged value was the promotion of personal development and character of the individual. The label attached to one's identity was central to the "quest for self-satisfaction, choice, and self-expression" (Gauss, 1983, p. 165). A "multiracial" category implied the right of autonomy, a "widening of the range of choices in order to gain greater control of one's life" (Dagger, 1997, p. 33).

Classification was seen as necessary for self-esteem. A Massachusetts politician who advocated on behalf of constituents in school districts that had refused to acknowledge the "multiracial" heritage of their children testified that a "multiracial" category would yield a "really positive feeling that can come forward with this for self identification and really help to establish some pride in their family" (Keating, cited in *Public Hearing in the Matter of Standards*, 1994, pp. 19-20). Congressman Conyers would break with his Congressional Black Caucus colleagues in July 1997 and support the interagency's recommendation to permit multiple checkoffs for "racial" identity because it would "help individuals to identify themselves in the way they are most comfortable" (Conyers, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, p. 535).

To be forced to choose a "racial" identity, to have someone choose for you, or to be classified as the "other" was seen as constituting a form of social death for the "multiracial" person. As the legislative chairperson who represented the Massachusetts Parent Teacher Student Association reasoned in her testimony, a change in administrative forms was called for so that "multiracial" children "[do not] have to choose the racial or ethnic background of one parent [and] in the process, are forced to deny the heritage of their other parent" (Provost, cited in *Public Hearing in the Matter of Standards*, 1994, pp. 21-22). A denial by the state of a person's

humanity was seen as preventing people from reaching their full potential as human beings. "It is especially offensive, as well a violation of privacy," said the executive director of the Association of MultiEthnic Americans,

to require that school officials visually inspect for purposes of racially classifying a student who does not identify mono-racially. This procedure has more in common with the sorting of animals, than it does with the ordinary respect supposed to be accorded human beings. (Fernández, cited in *Federal Measurement*, 1993, p. 126)

The second appeal was to community. The "multiracial" label also served to communicate the second privileged value associated with the promotion of personal development and character: interdependence. Interdependence sustained the bonds of community—and the converse was also true (Dagger, 1997). Individuality sustained the "multiracial's" integration in society, and inclusion in civil society strengthened the self-esteem of "multiracial" individuals. A "multiracial" category assured their children an equal and unique place in our society. Thus, a Massachusetts state legislator argued that "this category would help . . . deal with young people or older people, with a feeling of somehow being left out or demeaned by not being included . . . or just included in the category 'Other' " (Keating, cited in *Public Hearing in the Matter of Standards*, 1994, p. 19).

"Multiracialism" became the tie that binds. Perhaps one of the best examples of how the symbolism of a "multiracial" category resonated with the value of community occurred in a series of angry exchanges between supporters and opponents of a "multiracial" category, which took place at the 1997 congressional hearings shortly after Tiger Woods won the Master's Open golf tournament. A product of a "biracial," Thai and Black marriage, and a person whose father had multiple "racial" origins, Woods had publicly rejected the "Black" category and referred to himself as a "Cablamasian."

For the "multiracial" lobby, some congressmen, and the media, Tiger Woods represented a positive symbol of the melting pot: a manifestation of the nation's commitment to community and diversity and what was responsible for America's greatness. Moreover, a "multiracial" category was an objective acknowledgment of a demographic reality, of an increasingly "multiracial" society. And so, one witness advocating for a "multiracial" category commented that "Tiger Woods won the Master's and proudly claimed all his heritage," and that was America (Graham, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, p. 296). For Congressman Petri, Tiger Woods

affirmed "one of the sources of the strength of our country, a melding of many great cultures and traditions from around the world into one" (Petri, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, p. 224). Speaker of the House Gingrich also invoked the greatness of America, intoned "its genius" as a "melting pot" and its "rich tapestry," and praised Tiger Woods "as the best that we all can be," the "symbol of what America was," and "whose mixed heritage could be a recipe for hope proving to the world that it's not what color you are, but the way you carry yourself and the way you persist to reach your dreams" (Gingrich, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, pp. 661, 662).

Their third appeal was to the integrity of group identity in history. The "multiracial" category evoked a bright future of reduced social conflict and greater harmony. The president of the Association of Multi-Ethnic Americans urged congressional subcommittee members to end conflict, to

heal old tired wounds from a past that cannot continue to rule our future, or the future of all our children, be they black, white, Asian, American Indian, Hispanic or multiracial. The children of America deserve a future that finally lives up to the promise of serving each and every member of society with dignity, honor, and respect. (Douglas, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, pp. 385-387)

Douglas concluded her remarks by invoking fundamental human values and the principles of an enlightened society: "We are the changing face of America and a reflection of its highest ideals when it comes to human interaction, acceptance, and love. If one member of our society is without freedom then none of us are truly free" (pp. 385-387).

Fourth, advocates for a "multiracial" category argued that data obtained through the vital statistics system were problematic (see Robbin, 1999). Birth certificates did not accurately record the "race" of children born to parents of "biracial" heritage. Death certificates showed evidence of a similar problem.

Why did minority population interest groups so vehemently oppose the addition of this category? These interest groups certainly did acknowledge that multiracial individuals carried the "stigma" of being "non-White" and that most "African Americans" were "multiracial." Government statisticians acknowledged that "racial" and "ethnic" origin statistics contained measurement error. And, why did various agencies of the federal government so strongly oppose self-identification by the respondent? The explanation can be found in their assessment of the probable outcomes flowing from the directive's mandate, which legitimated the concept of a

social group in law and policy and allocated benefits in ways far beyond a symbolic commitment to the concept of protected groups.

The discourse of the opponents of a "multiracial" category was in stark contrast to the tapestry and melting pot metaphors employed by supporters of a "multiracial" category, who evoked a mythical collective memory of "racial" discrimination and social conflict and the responsibility of the state to carry out its mission. The opponents invoked law and policy and the role of the state to support their claims and also employed the warrants of science and bureaucratic rationality to strengthen their claims.

The opponents of a "multiracial" category did not reject the liberal conception of individuality, nor did they deny the presumption that the state played an essential role in furthering this objective. However, they viewed the privileging of individuality as problematic in practice: The reality, they argued, was that only some people were privileged and that the range of choices was narrowed for others. Policy outcomes thus contributed to social division and conflict. Instead, interdependence implied obligations to others, reciprocity, and fairness. The policy solution was to privilege existing and established social groups.

Achieving this solution required an active state that would aggressively intervene to ensure the well-being of the social group, which in turn would contribute to the well-being of the collectivity. By inference, then, the administrative record-keeping function of the directive was of the utmost importance to document the status of the social group. The essence of their claims was that the current classification, which provided both high quality and accurate data, must be retained as a tool to enforce civil rights laws and provide human services.

Political representation, protection from discriminatory practices based on race, and access to material resources flowed, they argued, from category assignment. Witness after witness invoked a history of "racial" inequality and discriminatory practices. They linked the directive to voting and civil rights and opposed the addition of a "multiracial" category because it would severely diminish the gains that minorities had already made.

The directive had been instrumental in the ongoing effort to protect and promote the legitimate interests of "African Americans." Opposition was necessary, contended the witness testifying for the National Urban League, because "any modification might potentially undermine, attenuate, or impair the utility of the system to the African-American community or otherwise jeopardize the protections and gains that have been achieved thereunder" (Tidwell, cited in *Review of Federal Measurements*,

1993, p. 230). The spokesperson for the National Council of La Raza argued that modifying the directive would diminish the ability to "inform lawmakers about the distinct needs of special historically disadvantaged populations" (Rodriguez, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, p. 317). Statistical Policy Directive 15, contended the spokesperson for the "American Indian" coalition, was "part of the government's attempt to remedy decades of institutionalized discrimination against nonwhite persons that [had] prevented racial minorities from asserting rights for some of the basic necessities of life" (Ma, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, p. 417).

The historical legacy of slavery and segregation required continued vigilance to ensure fair representation and identify discrimination, Congressman Davis argued, and as such, the directive had played a critical role in political redistricting and civil rights monitoring and compliance. If adopted by a significant majority of people, a "multiracial" category was seen as making monitoring and compliance very difficult and might subsequently affect other categories as well. The effects would be felt at all levels of the governmental system. Congresswoman Meek, a member of the Black Caucus, testified that progress in voting and civil rights was responsible for her election to Congress and reminded OMB and her congressional colleagues that "the primary purpose of the racial questions on the census is to permit enforcement of both the equal protection provisions of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution and the anti-discrimination laws that past Congresses have enacted" (Meek, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, p. 530).

Adding a new category would also redefine category boundaries, threatening to diminish the size of the social groups constituted by the categories. The consequences would be to reduce access to political and material resources that depended on formulas based on the size of the group. As Reverend Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership Coalition remarked during a radio interview, "A number of African-Americans or the number of Hispanics is artificially reduced because of labeling, and we're apt to lose some political empowerment" (Cable News Network, Inc., 1997, p. 2). The loss of material benefits from the addition of a "multiracial" category was deemed to be substantial, in particular for the "Asian" and "American Indian" populations (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997b).

Symbolic interests also figured prominently in the arguments against adding a "multiracial" category. Sociologist Mary Waters, in opposition to the addition of a "multiracial" category, commented that one of the consequences was that

the category would take on social meaning and [could] actually become an ethnic or racial group. The fact that this group does not exist now, except as a statistical artifact and a coalition of people lobbying the Federal Government, does not mean that the group cannot come into existence and begin to have social meaning for people. . . . It's not simply a technical choice [to add a category], but it will have long term implications for how people actually think of themselves, and what kind of data are actually reported for different categories. (*Federal Measures*, 1997, p. 441)

(She failed, however, to acknowledge that previous categories were also "statistical artifacts.")

The litany of justification heard over and over again by members of federal agencies, members of the Senate, and minority population groups was that the state's commitment to the nation's well-being was inextricably bound to the collection of data required by existing statutes and procedures. Agencies, such as the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the General Accounting Office, the National Center for Health Statistics, the Equal Opportunity Commission and offices of civil rights inside the agencies, and the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education, continually emphasized their concern for comparable, standardized, and longitudinal data across data systems to examine trends and permit them to carry out their programmatic mission. The head of the National Center for Health Statistics spoke for all the agencies when he testified that "standard classification is essential because of the need to combine data from different sources" and "because of the strong interdependence of Federal agencies regarding these data" (Feinleib, cited in *Review of Federal Measurements*, 1993, p. 71). Data collected over time were vitally necessary as a tool for measurement.

Agency representatives contended that the current system provided adequate data and that changes to the directive should not be made because a "multiracial" category would increase the inaccuracy of "race" and "ethnic" data. Modifications would endanger their programmatic mission and legal mandates for enforcing the law and impede their relationship with other governmental and nongovernmental organizations on which the federal agencies relied for data collection and reporting. Provisions that "threatened the accuracy, quality, and utility of the Federal race and ethnic data would likely inhibit civil rights and other public policy initiatives that rely almost exclusively on such data," and "delivery of services to needy and deserving communities would be compromised" (Rodriguez, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, pp. 317-319). Moreover, changes would be expensive to implement not only by the federal agencies

but by all sectors of society on which the federal government depended for information. Fred Fernandez of United Parcel Service (Cable News Network, Inc., 1997) echoed the refrain of high costs in remarks made during a radio broadcast, asserting that corporations had "estimated it would cost large employers a minimum of a quarter million dollars to comply with federal rules recognizing multiracial as a separate racial category" (p. 2).

The effects of modifying the directive were unknown. Changes were *troubling*, a word regularly employed by the federal agencies and minority population interest groups that testified. Change would jeopardize record-keeping and reporting requirements. Ordinary people would be confused, contributing even further to disruptions in the historical continuity of the data.

An overriding fear of contributing to the growing political conflict in the body politic framed their opposition to altering the directive: Change was complex and controversial and would contribute to racial division and was therefore to be avoided at all cost. New categories would increase social divisions, argued Representative Norton:

What attaches to that category [referencing Caribbean administrative record-keeping systems] has been a whole set of distinctions, privileges, benefits, and lack of the same. The last thing we need in this country, given the role race has played, is a new category that develops into a new race. (Norton, cited in *Federal Measures*, 1997, p. 515)

To read the debates about reclassification of the "Native Hawaiians" into the "American Indian and Alaska Native" category and the "multiracial" category in the congressional and OMB hearings and the letters that composed the public comments to the three *Federal Register* notices is to feel as if the "processes of cultural and ideological history flowed through the minds" of the stakeholders (Billig et al., 1988, p. 2). Although the warrants and claims of the social groups reflect "[their] own times, they also reflect a history [of social dialogue and debate] which produced those current moments" (Billig et al., 1988, p. 2).

SUMMARY

Classification systems are not neutral and objective instruments of public policy, although record-keeping systems and the statistics they produce are often justified by their presumed objective status and thus placed

outside the realm of political discourse. Because political controversy destabilizes and challenges administrative routines, state agencies try to insulate themselves from external political demands. The resulting contradictions—given their publicly accountable status as agents of a democratic state—lead to a precarious balancing act.

The public review of Statistical Policy Directive 15 and its outcome followed a standard trajectory of the policy process: Political and state action is quiescent for years until events coalesce to introduce disruptions in the political sphere. It became harder and harder to ignore both technical and political problems with the classification system, which could no longer be isolated from other parts of the political system.

Over more than two decades, research both by government statisticians and by social scientists indicated a significant and growing measurement error associated with responses to the “racial” and “ethnic” group categories. Although the error was known, it was ignored or tolerated. This status quo was maintained until serious political disputes in Congress and elsewhere about the decennial census and other public policies erupted and until political challenges to the “racial” order by the mobilization of “multi-racial” groups threatened the stability of administrative policy. Large-scale demographic changes coupled with the politics of identity that mobilized individuals into politically active social groups further destabilized the administrative status quo (see Robbin, *in press*).

Measurement error became the public justification for the assessment of OMB Statistical Policy Directive 15. OMB responded to the crisis by initiating a public review during which debate could take place, becoming the focus of collective demands both for change and for enforcement of existing privileges.

The venue for administrative policy shifted from inside the federal agencies to the floor of Congress and to public hearings across the country; and the national print and broadcasting media were employed as highly effective vehicles for mobilizing supporters. Groups organized to demand changes, and significant conflict about public policies interdependent with the directive spilled over into what was formerly a policy domain to which few interests attended. Their challenges created an unstable equilibrium in which an institutionalized consensus about classifying “racial” and “ethnic” identity was disrupted.

All the stakeholders argued that a revision would result in a fundamental transformation of the U.S. political system. To alter the categories defined by the directive would reallocate billions of dollars in public

funds; modify a host of political, legal, and social arrangements; and create new conceptions of "racial" and "ethnic" identity. As such, changes in Statistical Policy Directive 15 offered the potential to shatter administrative and political routines and to make more visible the major fault lines of American society.

The public review and program of research initiated by the agencies served as vehicles for exploring the range of potential accommodations. Ultimately, OMB had to make a decision because of the timing of preliminary fieldwork for the 2000 census. OMB's decision in October 1997 was an attempt to accommodate as many of the interest groups as possible, even as its decision to split the "Asian or Pacific Islander" category into "Asian" and "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander" opposed the recommendation made by its own Interagency Committee.

The revision of the standard in 1997 was only partial. Major conceptual, definitional, theoretical, and measurement problems with the quality of "racial" and "ethnic" group statistics were not addressed. Public opposition by minority population interest groups and by the agencies—particularly those concerned with civil rights monitoring and enforcement—was, however, temporarily silenced. Some of the "multiracial" groups continued to lobby for including a "multiracial" category in the next census and tabulating the "more than one race" responses as "multiracial." Given that OMB had ignored recommendations made by federal agencies, public opposition and conflict would emerge once again when OMB issued a new *Federal Register* notice on instructions for tabulating and reporting the numbers. A new, unstable equilibrium would be reestablished.

The two case studies of conflict, reclassifying "Native Hawaiians" in the "American Indian and Alaska Native" category and the addition of a "multiracial" category, illustrate the relationships of public policy, administrative decision making, and politics. The basic struggle was over public policies that allocated and redistributed material and symbolic resources. These policies were decided by administrative and political agendas through the publication of statistical data that no longer reflected large-scale demographic changes and interpersonal social relations between the "races." Lastly, the process occurred in a political setting in which a host of rights and entitlements were contested. Political actors, including new entrants to the political process, activated supporters and opponents to pressure the administrative structure responsible for implementing the directive.

ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY, LIBERAL VALUES, AND CONFLICTS OVER IDENTITY

The case studies show that official classification systems cum administrative policy reproduce intense political conflicts about rights and responsibilities of the individual, social group, community, and the state; what constitutes the public good; and how to achieve a more just society. Claims advanced by various groups agreed on fundamental values—of conceptions of the autonomous individual and respect for persons, the role of the state, and the need for a stable social order. But, they differed on the means—the prioritizing and ordering of values—to achieve a more just society. Political conflict arose over which values to privilege because this particular administrative policy had significant material, political, social, and symbolic consequences. The competing claims, embedded as they were in a host of political choices about social relations between the races, heightened ambiguity and uncertainty and thus created significant dilemmas for public policy.

The conflicting meanings and interests attributed to the classification of identity suggest that there will always be controversy and a lack of consensus “about the pertinent facts and a rational course of action,” and that the “controversy over meaning will never be resolved” (Edelman, 1977, p. 4). The outcome, Omi and Winant (1994) conclude, is a “deeply ambiguous and contradictory public policy” (p. 76).

The contested terrain of the classification of “racial” and “ethnic” group categories can be understood within a theory of political conflict in the administrative sphere, as part of a more comprehensive theory of democracy. This framework, which cannot be developed here, integrates Kingdon’s (1984) theory of agenda setting,¹⁵ Omi and Winant’s (1994) theory of the “racial” state and trajectory of “racial” politics, Baumgartner and Jones’s (1993) theory of punctuated or disrupted equilibrium, and a theory of the formation, mobilization, cooperation, and conflict of social groups around issue networks (cf. Berry, 1997; Garson, 1978; Truman, 1951; Walker, 1983).

This theory of political conflict over administrative policy is based on a conception of democracy that emphasizes the ways in which (a) groups reach collective judgments about public policies that engender disagreement and moral conflict and (b) state agencies respond by adjusting policies to balance competing political and administrative priorities (cf. C. W. Anderson, 1990; Barber, 1988; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Mansbridge,

1983). In such conflictual processes, everyday discourse reproduces the contradictory themes of modern liberal democracy. Liberal democracy functions as the collective memory of all the stakeholders in such conflicts. The political discourse of the opposing sides resonates with the themes of liberal democratic theory in the late 20th century. Administrative policy frequently becomes the political arena in which contesting interests use the symbols of collective identity to their advantage, using whatever resources are at their disposal.

NOTES

1. I place quotation marks around the names of the racial and ethnic group categories to reinforce the fact that they are socially constructed, and I emphasize the ideological and political character of the terms "racial" and "ethnic" by putting them between quotation marks. Precisely because such categories become taken for granted as real, the reader must be constantly reminded of their arbitrary and historically contingent character. For a discussion of the social construction of "race," see the American Anthropological Association (1997) and Schlesinger (1992). Further evidence of the social construction of "race" comes from Susan Graham (personal communication, June 1997), the executive director of Project RACE, who told me that the organization had "worked very hard to eliminate the hyphen in 'multiracial' " so it would be used as one word.

2. *Federal Register* notices and other official documents issued between 1993 and 1997 refer to the standard as Statistical Policy Directive 15, although this form of administrative policy is not part of the system of circulars and bulletins published by the Office of Management and Budget; thus, I continue to refer to it by its widely known name. *Standard* is used throughout this article interchangeably with and as a synonym for *system*, as in *classification system*. It should be noted that official documents are inconsistent in their use of *standard*; sometimes the word is used in the singular, and sometimes it is used in the plural, as in *standards*. Whenever I quote a source, I use the term as the participant used it; otherwise, I refer to Statistical Policy Directive 15 as a standard.

3. The theoretical perspective that I rely on links theories about the role of the state in identity formation and social order to theories of the social construction of meaning. This article extends recent discussions by Yanow (1996) of the social construction of "racial" and "ethnic" group categories in the decennial censuses and by Furlong (1997), Golden (1998), and Balla (1998) of participation by interest groups in the notice and comment process and their ability to influence rule making. Classification of "race" and "ethnicity," institutional structures, and political and social relations have been examined in an international perspective by Nagel (1986, 1994), in the context of the sociology of knowledge in a study of Hawaiian society by Petersen (1969), and in a historical analysis of U.S. society by Lee (1993). My research, however, relies on the discourse of the stakeholders to establish empirically the meaning of "racial" and "ethnic" group classification, similar to the discourse analysis of Billig et al. (1988), who examine ideological dilemmas in a variety of settings, and Wetherell and Potter (1992), whose integration of theory and method to analyze the discourse of racism among New Zealanders greatly influenced my thinking.

4. For example, "Hispanic" or "Latino" "racial" identity depends on language, social class, neighborhood socialization, phenotype, and phenotypic variation within families (Rodriguez, 1991). Outside the United States, particularly in Latin America, "race" is perceived as a broad spectrum of colors. Even within the same family, people may identify themselves as "racially" different (Rodriguez, 1992). Only upon coming to the United States must "Hispanics" choose to be either "Black" or "White." Seeing neither of them as appropriate leads them to choose the residual category of "other," reject the U.S. Office of Management and Budget categories, or self-identify by national origin (Calerón, 1992; Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987; Obolér, 1992; Rodriguez, 1990, 1991; Rodriguez & Cordero-Guzman, 1992; Treviño, 1987).

5. The only information we have from the report is that internal disputes included the following: What categories should be created? What names should be assigned to a particular category? Who should be included in the category (i.e., how should membership be defined)? How should the methodological issue of data collection (by self-identification or observation by a third party) be solved? The Federal Interagency Committee on Education Ad Hoc Committee would answer these questions by creating categories that were not exhaustive or mutually exclusive; creating categories that were not independent of specific federal laws and agency mandates for providing services to identify protected classes; creating rules for inclusion based on population size; membership by geographic location (cum national origin or ancestry), language, minority status, political status, and physical characteristics; creating category names that were believed to be understandable; and permitting both self-identification and third-party observer status as methods of information collection. The report does not reveal that agencies were opposed to the establishment of a standard, that is, that "racial" and "ethnic" group statistics should be collected.

6. A very large number of letter writers who responded to the request for public comment about the review of the directive commented that the standard reinforced or was indeed responsible for the quality of "race" relations in the society. They linked their support for or opposition to civil rights, affirmative action, and other social welfare programs to the existence of the directive.

7. Because of space constraints, I exclude a discussion of the outcome of U.S. Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) draft Statistical Policy Circular in the *Federal Register*, released in 1988, which solicited public comment on a comprehensive review (revision) of Statistical Policy Directive 15 (cf. Proposed Guidelines, 1988; Standards for the Classification, 1994, p. 2). The draft circular proposal was both supported and opposed. Opposition was vigorous on the part of the U.S. Senate, many federal agencies, large corporations, and some minority population groups. The notice does not identify the corporations and minority population groups, and it provides little information as to why agencies opposed changes. The vociferous opposition led OMB to withdraw the proposal. OMB had "walked into a firestorm," the administrator of OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs was to recall in her testimony before a congressional subcommittee 5 years later (*Review of Federal Measurements*, 1993, p. 216).

8. Congressional hearings were held on April 14, June 30, July 29, and November 3, 1993 (see *Review of Federal Measurements*, 1993), and on April 23, May 22, and July 25, 1997 (see *Federal Measures*, 1997). A total of 94 witnesses testified at four U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) hearings that were held in July 1994 in Boston, Denver, San Francisco, and Honolulu. The public comments following three *Federal Register* notices issued in June 1994, August 1995, and July 1997 are maintained in the OMB docket room. I scanned all the documents (June 1994, 765; August 1995, 176; July 1997, 311—excluding

the 7,000 postcards supporting the reclassification of "Native Hawaiians" to the "American Indian and Alaska Native" category). The scanned archive occupies about 240 megabytes of hard disk, attesting to the quantity of documents that citizens conveyed to OMB; many of the documents contain letters and petitions from multiple individuals.

9. The Interagency Committee's Research Working Group, cochaired by the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, reviewed research and developed a research agenda for the assessment, which was operationalized through the multiyear program of testing and evaluation for census 2000 and through research conducted by various federal agencies (cf. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996, 1997b; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 1996, 1998). A significant research effort was devoted to evaluating different question wording and sequencing of "race" and "ethnic" group items and the effects of adding a "multiracial" category. The addition of a "multiracial" category consumed a major component of agency testing and evaluation efforts, a testimony to the political pressure that was levied by both the "multiracial" lobby and its opponents.

10. The language of justification employed by speakers representing the "Native Hawaiian," "American Indian," and "multiracial" category was so uniform that only when I quote a large amount of text do I reference the speaker and the source of the text. At the end of such text, I indicate the numeric identifier assigned by U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for a letter received as part of the public comment, to which I added a prefix (i.e., *FR*) to indicate the relevant *Federal Register* notice. Thus, FR1 is June 1994; FR2 is August 1995; and FR3 is July 1997. FR1-005 is the fifth letter received by OMB following the June 1994 notice.

11. My discussion focuses on "Native Hawaiians"; however, other "Pacific Islander" groups, including "American Samoans," "Carolinians," and "Chamorros," made similar arguments for being reclassified, and "Asian" advocacy and interest groups supported the "Native Hawaiian" position. During the U.S. Office of Management and Budget hearings, 20 civic and other advocacy organizations were mobilized in support of the reclassification of "Pacific Islanders" as original peoples to the "American Indian and Alaska Native" category.

12. Working principally at the local and state levels but also with Congress, Project RACE's advocacy persuaded members of Congress; legislatures in five states; local, state, and national Parent-Teacher Organizations; and several school districts to support the addition of a "multiracial" category in administrative record-keeping systems. State education agencies in 31 states received requests to add a "multiracial" category—the result of initiatives by Project RACE's locally based organizations (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Project RACE also persuaded the College Board to include a "multiracial" category on the American College Test, which in many states is required for admission to college.

13. These minority population interest groups consisted of "African Americans," who were represented by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Urban League, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law; "Hispanics" by the National Council of La Raza and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund; "Asian and Pacific Islanders" by the National Coalition for an Accurate Count of Asian and Pacific Islanders and National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium; and "American Indians" by the National Congress of American Indians.

14. As noted earlier, both the Interagency Committee and U.S. Office of Management and Budget ultimately rejected the addition of a "multiracial" category. However, the Association of MultiEthnic Americans and other multiethnic groups—but not Project

RACE—claimed at least a partial victory with the decision to permit “select all races that apply.”

15. Cobb and Elder (1983) must also be acknowledged as formative for identifying the need to integrate multiple theoretical perspectives on this subject and for integrating Edelman's (1964) thesis about symbolic politics. Also, Cobb and Ross (1997) are important for integrating the role of the mass media in agenda setting.

REFERENCES

- Alford, R. R. (1998). *The craft of inquiry: Theories, methods, evidence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alford, R. R., & Friedland, R. (1985). *Powers of theory: Capitalism, the state, and democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- American Anthropological Association. (1997). *Response to OMB Directive 15*. Retrieved September 30, 1997, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.ameranthassn.org/comsumm.htm>
- Anderson, C. W. (1990). *Pragmatic liberalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Anderson, M. J. (1988). *The American census: A social history*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Balla, S. J. (1998). Administrative procedures and political control of the bureaucracy. *American Political Science Review*, 92, 663-673.
- Barber, B. (1988). *The conquest of politics: Liberal philosophy in democratic times*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Baumgartner, F. R., & Jones, B. D. (1993). *Agendas and instability in American politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berry, J. M. (1997). *The interest group society* (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.
- Billig, M., Condor, S., Edwards, D., Gane, M., Middleton, D., & Radley, A. (1988). *Ideological dilemmas: A social psychology of everyday thinking*. London: Sage.
- Cable News Network, Inc. (1997, July 9). *Racial classification in question as 2000 census approaches. Washington unwrapped 14:00 p.m. EST* (Transcript #97070908FN-L07). Retrieved November 27, 1997, from the World Wide Web: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/>
- Calerón, J. (1992). “Hispanic” and “Latino”: The viability of categories for panethnic unity. *Latin American Perspectives*, 19(4), 37-44.
- Cobb, R. W., & Elder, C. D. (1983). *Participation in American politics: The dynamics of agenda-building* (2nd ed.). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cobb, R. W., & Ross, M. H. (1997). Agenda setting and the denial of agenda access: Key concepts. In R. W. Cobb & M. H. Ross (Eds.), *Cultural strategies of agenda denial* (pp. 3-24). Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Cohen, M. R., & Nagel, E. (1934). *An introduction to logic and scientific method*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Dagger, R. (1997). *Civic virtues: Rights, citizenship, and republican liberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, F. J. (Ed.). (1991). *Who is Black? One nation's definition*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

- Desrosières, A. (1993). *La politique des grands nombres: Histoire de la raison statistique* [The politics of large numbers: A history of statistical reasoning]. Paris: Éditions La Découverte.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (Eds.). (1991). *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dominguez, V. R. (1986). *White by definition*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Duncan, J. W., & Shelton, W. C. (1978). *Revolution in United States government statistics, 1926-1976*. Washington, DC: Office of Federal Statistical Policy and Standards.
- Economic and social statistics for Americans of Spanish origin: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, House of Representatives, 94th Cong., 1st Sess.* (1975).
- Edelman, M. (1964). *Symbolic uses of politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Edelman, M. (1971). *Politics as symbolic action: Mass arousal & quiescence*. Chicago: Markham.
- Edelman, M. (1977). *Political language: Words that succeed and policies that fail*. New York: Academic Press.
- Edelman, M. (1988). *Constructing the political spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Edmonston, B., Goldstein, J., & Lott, J. T. (Eds.). (1996). *Spotlight on heterogeneity: The federal standards for racial and ethnic classification* (summary of a workshop). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Edmonston, B., & Schultze, C. (Eds.). (1994). *Modernizing the U.S. census*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Espiritu, Y. L. (1992). *Asian American panethnicity: Bridging institutions and identities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Estrada, L. F. (1992). The politics of the census: A reflection of the dilemmas in U.S. society. In *Challenges of measuring an ethnic world: Science, politics and reality. Proceedings of the joint Canada-United States conference on the measurement of ethnicity* (pp. 497-512). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Federal Interagency Committee on Education. (1975, April). *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on racial and ethnic definitions*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.
- Federal measurement of race and ethnicity: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Census, Statistics and Postal Personnel, 103rd Cong., 1st Sess.* (1993).
- Federal measures of race and ethnicity and the implications for the 2000 census: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Government Management, Information, and Technology, 105th Cong., 1st Sess.* (1997).
- Feeney, P. (1994). *The 200 years' war and counting: Power politics and census controversies, 1790-1990*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, MD.
- Frankenberg, R. (1993). *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Friedland, R., & Alford, R. R. (1991). Bringing society back in: Symbols, practices, and institutional contradictions. In P. J. DiMaggio & W. W. Powell (Eds.), *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis* (pp. 232-263). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Furlong, S. R. (1997). Interest group influence on rule making. *Administration & Society*, 29, 325-347.

- Garson, G. D. (1978). *Group theories of politics*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Gauss, G. F. (1983). *The modern liberal theory of man*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Golden, M. M. (1998). Interest groups in the rule-making process: Who participates? Whose voices get heard? *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 8(2), 245-270.
- Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. (1996). *Democracy and disagreement*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Hahn, R. A. (1992). The state of federal health statistics on racial and ethnic groups. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 267(2), 268-271.
- Hahn, R. A., Mulinare, J., & Teutsch, S. M. (1992). Inconsistencies in coding of race and ethnicity between birth and death in US infants. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 267(2), 259-263.
- Hayes-Bautista, D. E., & Chapa, J. (1987). Latino terminology: Conceptual bases for standardized terminology. *American Journal of Public Health*, 77(1), 61-68.
- Kingdon, J. W. (1984). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Lee, S. M. (1993). Racial classification in the US census: 1890-1990. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 16(1), 75-94.
- Mansbridge, J. J. (1983). *Beyond adversary democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1989). *Rediscovering institutions: The organizational basis of politics*. New York: Free Press.
- McKay, R. B., & de la Puente, M. (1995, March). *Cognitive research in designing the CPS Supplement on Race and Ethnicity*. Paper presented at the U.S. Bureau of the Census 1995 Annual Research Conference, Rosslyn, VA.
- Mitroff, I. L., Mason, R. O., & Barabba, V. (1983). *The 1980 census: Policy making amid turbulence*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Montgomery, S. L. (1996). *The scientific voice*. New York: Guilford.
- Nagel, J. (1986). The political construction of ethnicity. In S. Olzak & J. Nagel (Eds.), *Competitive ethnic relations* (pp. 93-112). New York: Academic Press.
- Nagel, J. (1994). Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture. *Social Problems*, 41(1), 152-176.
- Obolér, S. (1992). The politics of labeling: Latino/a cultural identities of self and others. *Latin American Perspectives*, 19(4), 18-36.
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1994). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Petersen, W. (1969). The classification of subnations in Hawaii: An essay in the sociology of knowledge. *American Sociological Review*, 34, 863-877.
- Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. London: Sage.
- Proposed guidelines for federal statistical activities. 53 Fed. Reg. 12, 1542-1552 (1988, January 20).
- Public hearing in the matter of standards for the classification of federal data on race and ethnicity*, Office of Management and Budget, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, Boston (1994a, July 7).
- Public hearing on standards for the classification of federal data on race and ethnicity*, Office of Management and Budget, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, Honolulu (1994b, July 18-19).
- Recommendations from the Interagency Committee for the Review of the Racial and Ethnic Standards to the Office of Management and Budget Concerning Changes to the Standards

- for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity. 62 Fed. Reg. 131, 36874-36946 (1997, July 9).
- Revisions to the standards for the classification of federal data on race and ethnicity. 62 Fed. Reg. 210, 58782-58790 (1997, October 30).
- Review of federal measurements of race and ethnicity: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Census, Statistics and Postal Personnel of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, House of Representatives*, 103rd Cong., 1st Sess. (1993).
- Robbin, A. (1999). The problematic status of statistics on race and ethnicity: An "imperfect representation of reality." *Journal of Government Information*, 26, 467-483.
- Robbin, A. (2000). Classifying racial and ethnic group data in the United States: The politics of negotiation and accommodation. *Journal of Government Information*, 27(2), 129-150.
- Robbin, A. (in press). The politics of representation in the U.S. national statistical system: Origins of minority population interest group participation. *Journal of Government Information*.
- Rodriguez, C. E. (1990). Racial classification among Puerto Rican men and women in New York. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 12, 366-379.
- Rodriguez, C. E. (1991). *Puerto Ricans: Born in the U.S.A.* Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). Race, culture, and Latino "otherness" in the 1980 census. *Social Science Quarterly*, 73, 929-937.
- Rodriguez, C. E., & Cordero-Guzman, H. (1992). Placing race in context. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 15, 523-542.
- Schlesinger, A. M. (1992). *The disuniting of America: Reflections on a multicultural society*. New York: Norton.
- Standards for the classification of federal data on race and ethnicity. 59 Fed. Reg., 29831-29835 (1994, June 9).
- Treviño, F. M. (1987). Standardized terminology for Hispanic populations. *American Journal of Public Health*, 77(1), 69-72.
- Truman, D. B. (1951). *The governmental process*. New York: Knopf.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1989). *200 years of U.S. census taking: Population and housing questions, 1790-1990*. Washington, DC: Author.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1996). *Findings on questions on race and Hispanic origin tested in the 1996 National Content Survey* (Population Division Working Paper Series). Washington, DC: Author.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1997a). *Preparing for census 2000: Subjects planned for census 2000; Federal legislative and program uses*. Washington, DC: Author.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1997b). *Results of the 1996 race and ethnic targeted test* (Population Division Working Paper 18). Washington, DC: Author.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1998, July 27). *Interracial married couples: 1960 to present* (Table MS-3). Retrieved October 4, 1998, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.census.gov/p...cdemo/ms-la/tabms-3.txt>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (1996). *Testing methods of collecting racial and ethnic information: Results of the Current Population Survey Supplement on race and ethnicity* (BLS Statistical Notes 40). Washington, DC: Author.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1996). *Racial and ethnic classifications used by public schools* (NCES 96-092). Washington, DC: Author.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1998). *State survey on racial and ethnic classifications* (NCES 98-034). Washington, DC: Author.

- Walker, J. L., Jr. (1983). The origins and maintenance of interest groups in America. *American Political Science Review*, 77, 390-406.
- Wallman, K. K. (1978). Statistics for Americans of Spanish origin or descent. *Statistical Reporter*, 78(2), 148-152.
- Waters, M. C. (1990). *Ethnic options: Choosing identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wetherell, M., & Potter, J. (1992). *Mapping the language of racism: Discourse and the legitimization of exploitation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yanow, D. (1996). American ethnogenesis and public administration. *Administration & Society*, 27, 483-509.

Alice Robbin is an associate professor in the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University at Bloomington. Her research interests include information policy, communication and information behavior in complex organizations, and societal implications of the information age. She holds a Ph.D. in political science (minor in sociology) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She investigates various aspects of information policy design and analysis of the national and international information infrastructure. Her current research examines the 4-year public review initiated by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget to modify policy on the classification of race and ethnicity.